
Linking Past and Present: John Dewey and assessment for learning

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ABSTRACT This collection of extracts is drawn from an article originally published in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* (2012). It provides an important reminder to understand Assessment for Learning in depth, by relating some of its key features to aspects of John Dewey's educational and political philosophy of democratic participation.

This set of extracts from an article by two educators in Alberta, Canada explores the resonance between assessment for learning (AfL) and the orientation of Dewey's educational and political thought towards participatory democracy. The authors suggest various ways in which an understanding of key pedagogic principles can enhance practices of formative assessment.

We believe the principles behind Dewey's educational philosophy are congruent with fundamental principles of AfL. These principles reside, intrinsically, in the spaces between words and concepts such as student engagement, citizenship, creativity, responsibility and communication. They challenge the pedagogy of teaching, the role of the teacher, the sociology of the classroom and the role of the student. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to attempt to explicate key intersections between Dewey's teachings and AfL.

For Dewey, democracy and education were interdependent, and his philosophy of education was deeply rooted in the power of inquiry... Dewey maintained that children must actively participate in their education because 'if the pupil has no initiative of his own in this direction, the result is a random groping after what is wanted, and the formation of habits of dependence upon the cues furnished by others' (Dewey, 1916, ch. 3, §6).

The Principles of Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning, when used freely as an ongoing process of discourse between teacher and student, values the ethical and aesthetic aspects of education. It is a respectful and considerate way for teachers to gain a shared understanding of individual students and work with them to shape their learning. It can 'heighten student significance' (p. 25).

Sadler (1989), as quoted by Chappuis (2009), suggested that formative assessment would be even more effective if students held a 'concept of quality roughly similar to that of the teacher', were able to monitor their own work as it evolved, and had a variety of learning options to choose from (p. 10). Chappuis ... developed an AFL framework that outlined seven strategies ... that focused on the needs of the learner.

Where Am I Going?

Strategies 1 and 2: defining learning targets and providing exemplars

These first two strategies allow students to develop an understanding of what they will be learning and enable effective feedback at later stages. Teachers determine the learning targets based on curricular learner outcomes and communicate these targets in language easily understood by the student. Students, shown examples of both strong and weak work, are provided with visual representations of the criteria and the levels of quality required to achieve the outcomes. A clear understanding of the purpose behind an action can be, in itself, motivating.

Heading in the Right Direction – According to Dewey

These first two strategies match Dewey's philosophy. Dewey (1938/1997) believed that a major deficit in the traditional educational system was the 'failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying' (ch. 6, §1)... Teachers who allow students to set their own directions empower them, and 'such freedom is in turn identical with self-control; for the formation of purposes and the organization of means to execute them are the work of intelligence' (ch. 6, §1).

Where Am I Now?

Strategies 3 and 4: regular descriptive feedback and self-assessment and goal setting

Descriptive feedback, either verbal or written, is an ongoing process. For Chappuis (2009), quality feedback has the following characteristics:

1. it directs attention to the learning intended, focusing on strengths and providing information for improvement;

2. it occurs during learning while there is still time to make corrections;
3. it directly addresses partial understanding;
4. it does not provide the student with answers; and
5. it takes into account how much information students can process and act upon at a given time...

In AFL classrooms, teachers and students form learning partnerships where students are empowered to become active learners.

Self-assessment allows students to recognise their strengths and areas for improvement and encourages involvement with the curriculum. They also learn how to use teacher feedback, constructive criticism from other students, and self-assessment to identify what they need to work on and to set goals for future learning. Students can identify personal strengths and areas for improvement before handing in their work. They also learn how to interact and offer descriptive feedback to classmates.

Dewey Points the Way

Teachers who practise descriptive feedback, self-assessment and goal-setting appreciate the process of continuous communication. Dewey (1916) noted that 'not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative' (ch. 13, §13). His point mirrors the AFL principle that *authentic communication is a key to transformation and learning*.

Closing the Gap

Strategies 5 and 6: a focus on specific learning targets and on revision

Formative assessment enables the teacher and student to determine the rate and quality of learning that has taken place. At this point in the AfL continuum, the teacher focuses on students who have partial understandings of the outcomes or who lack the skills needed to proceed to the next level of learning. The premise of (5) is to centre the teacher's attention on a particular concept or skill that needs revision instead of addressing many skills at once... Focused revision encourages students to take ownership of their work and to re-work and make corrections based on one criterion at a time.

Strategy 7: self-reflection

Self-reflection encourages students to consider a collection of work as evidence of learning, identify their strengths and feel in control of the circumstances that led to success. Based on clear learning targets, students compare previous and current knowledge.

Dewey Builds a Bridge

Central to the AfL process is that the teacher remember that the *intellectual growth of the learner* is the ultimate goal... *Reflection is an intellectual activity that substantiates practice*, both for students and teachers... Van Manen (1995) quotes Dewey by saying that 'reflective thinking is important not only as a tool for teaching, but also as an aim for education since it enables us to know what we are about when we act' (p. 33). To change a belief is directly related to the ability to reflect on one's practice.

Conclusion

We believe that assessment for learning does not represent an end, but the *beginning of an educational philosophy that works to democratise education*. Assessment for learning is changing the structure of the classrooms. Teachers who once lectured are stepping away from the front of their classrooms and working beside and with learners: these teachers are building and becoming active parts of a classroom learning community. Communication, peer interaction and shared experiences are becoming, as Dewey foresaw, a basis for democratic thinking and powerful individual learning. Students in Alberta are benefiting in powerful ways. Dewey, in his wisdom, believed such knowledge would transform society. Although we are less knowledgeable about the whole of society, our experience tells us that AfL is positively changing the lives of students and teachers in the schools we know.

References

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